

An interview with Harry Frey ①

HARRY FREY

An Interview Conducted by

Martin Plascak

May 23, 1980

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NARRATOR DATA SHEET

Name of narrator: Harry E. Frey

Address: 5210 Clinton Rd. Phone: 466-4642

Birthdate: Dec. 31, 1913 Birthplace: Terre Haute

Length of residence in Terre Haute: Life

Education: High School

Occupational history: Musician -- 1932-1942

Radio announcer 1942-1955

Furniture sales 1955-1958

Radio sales & news 1958-1962

TV news 1962-present

Special interests, activities, etc. Antiques, sports cars

Major subject(s) of interview: Radio in Terre Haute

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<u>Date</u>	<u>Time</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Interviewer</u>
May 23, 1980		WTHI Studios 9th St. & Ohio	Martin Plascak

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Harry Frey

Tape 1

May 23, 1980 -- 2:00 P. M.

WTHI Building - 9th Street and Ohio Street, Terre Haute, Indiana

Interviewer: Martin Plascak

Transcriber: Nancy Bettinghaus

For: Vigo County Oral History Program

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MP: Harry, you go back in the radio here in the Terre Haute area to 1932. That's a long time ago. That was during the Depression years. What was radio like when you first started in 1932?

FREY: Well, Martin, my first impressions of radio . . . I actually got started -- what little bit I did in radio at that time -- because out of school, I sang. I was a singer and sang in plays and in productions /that/ we had at school, and I decided to try to get an audition on radio. I had listened to radio and I heard people singing with singing programs and I thought, well, I'll try it. So I went down to get an audition; and they said, well, they liked me all right, but they didn't pay any money or anything like that. If I wanted a program, I could have it. So my first impressions were that kind of thing. The fact that nobody . . . I suppose at the time there were a few people getting paid, but people who did talent programs like that received nothing. We got theater tickets or maybe something like that once in a while, but that's about all. And there was a lot more of that kind of thing going on in radio then. See, they had really no network programs or anything like that so all the radio programs were originated right there at the station.

So I had a regular singing program -- /a/ 15-minute singing program. As I remember, I think it was twice a week. They called me The Matinee Songster. That's the way it was billed.

At the same time, there were two other people /who had singing programs/. One, of course, was Burl Ives as you remember. He had a program they called "The Wayfaring Stranger" in which he was then doing folk songs as he has done all through his career. He was in school here at the time. And also a fellow named Claude Fitzsimmons, who they called The Melody Lad, also had the same type of 15-minute singing program.

FREY: They had other programs of people playing piano and various music programs [and] talk programs. That was all they had on radio at that time.

MP: Now, when you began in 1932 was it to perpetuate or promote a musical career, or did you ever think that you eventually would end up to stay in broadcasting as an announcer and later in news and the other jobs associated with broadcasting?

FREY: Not really. I was already getting interested in the music business even when I had the singing programs. I saw the bands playing and this kind of thing, and that intrigued me. I did play a little bit of piano and had fooled around with a bass viol, so I began to think, well, I can sing a little bit here, apparently. Maybe I can get a job with bands playing the bass and singing. So that's really . . . further than that I had no thoughts of staying in that particular thing or winding up in broadcasting in any other capacity.

MP: When and where did the change begin then? When did you ease out of the musical field and finally get into the announcing bit or the on-the-air portion of your career?

FREY: Well, this was much later, Martin. I did this. As I say, I was playing the bass viol and singing, so I decided to try to get work with bands after I got out of school. And that's exactly what I did. I started working with local bands first. Leo Baxter (you may have remembered Leo Baxter had a band). I was with his orchestra for quite a long time. I actually started out with a band. Jack O'Grady's orchestra was the first one I worked with. I later went with Leo Baxter and sang and played the bass viol in those bands. Again, as I say, I had no thoughts . . .

Actually, I should go back a little farther even before I went up to get an audition as a singer to try to get a job or to get a singing program on

FREY: this station. I can remember when the station was a little earlier than that. I think it was just south of Wabash Avenue on Eighth Street, if I remember right. Either there or I think it was in the Deming Hotel for a while -- one of those two places anyway. There were two people that I knew pretty well. One was Stanford Gilley, Bobby Gilley / nickname, who later was a music teacher at McLean Jr. High School and several schools around the Terre Haute area. Another singer who worked with a trio, Bobby Jones, worked with a vocal trio around town. I can remember seeing -- looking through the window and seeing them. They were called singing messengers -- or singing pages rather -- and they carried messages back and forth between people. They would stop and sing a song over the radio ever so often. Well, I was fascinated by that. If I remember, I think that is really how come I later decided to try to get an audition and get a singing program.

MP: Well, So to summarize for just a moment then, you actually . . . your first interest in broadcasting -- early broadcasting in Terre Haute -- began with the idea that you wanted to sing with a view toward developing a musical career, I take it?

FREY: Right. At least playing and singing in bands.

MP: What do you remember even before you took your first audition or went to it? What do you remember about those? We were in the middle of a depression at that time. Radio was not very old. What do you remember about this first commercial radio station in Terre Haute, which was WBOW / and which developed soon after WRPI at Rose Poly ended its broadcasting?

FREY: Well, the station itself, when I went up to the audition when I started doing the singing programs, was at Sixth and Wabash / Streets over where Rogers Jewelry Store is now. That was a multiple-story building at one time. Of course, you probably remember that. They took off the top stories. Well, WBOW was on the second floor of that building so that was my first impression.

FREY: Bill Bearman was the manager of the station at that time and I don't remember too much about the . . . I know there were DJs and they had commercials, were selling commercials, etc. I don't remember much about the rest of the personnel, because I was too tied up with the people involved in the singing programs. There was, as I remember, a Buddy Lawson that played piano and his sister, Ruth Lawson, sang. She had a singing program like the fellows did. And there were two or three other people besides that who played. But again, I would repeat that most of the programs were locally originated -- mostly musical programs /with/ some talk programs.

MP: What kind of a physical facility was up above Rogers Jewelry Store?

FREY: Well, it was just a few rooms on that second floor. We didn't have the entire floor; and, as I recall, there was a control room, one room they used for studio, and some waiting room space which, as I remember, was out in the hall with two or three sofas along the wall for people to sit in until they came into the station.

MP: Herman Moench told me this when I interviewed him pertaining to the station at Rose. /He said/ that he thought that the first station -- the first studios for the first commercial station here in town, WBOW -- were in the old Deming Hotel building. Do you remember that facility at all?

FREY: No, I don't. This may be the place I'm talking about that I used to watch Bobby Jones and Stanford Gilley as singing pages. I'm probably mistaken about the Eighth Street address. It was probably the Deming Hotel rather than that.

MP: So you remember from there the studios went up above the Rogers Building or at the . . . I understand at one time they were at the Oddfellows Building too?

FREY: Well, this is what I was thinking of. That's where I thought I remembered these studios as being at Eighth /Street/ and the alley between Wabash and

FREY  
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FREY: Ohio Streets on Eighth Street. I think that's possibly one of the moves that they made before they went to the Sixth and Wabash . . . .

MP: I don't think they were at the Deming Hotel too long.

Harry, again, what was Terre Haute like back in those early years when commercial radio blossomed upon the scene?

FREY: Well, Martin, of course, they were in the middle of the Depression. My impressions of that were that everybody was trying desperately to have enough money to feed their families and to exist. That was -- the main object was -- to exist. And there was no work for many, many, many people. So not being paid at the radio station really didn't bother any of us much because we couldn't make much money anyway anyplace else. My family, of course, were . . . my father was working but just barely. I mean, there was not much money to be had. So really, my impressions of the city and of the whole thing at that point were pretty depressing.

MP: Was radio a big thing then? Can you recall?

FREY: Yes. Radio was becoming a big thing, even just with singing programs like that. You would go out and people would say they heard you on the radio, so it was growing. It was, of course, not, you know, to any kind of capacity like it became. But it was growing considerably.

MP: In other words you would sing in your early years when you first got in, and someone would say "I heard you" just as years later they would say "I saw you on television."

FREY: Right. Same idea.

MP: All right. Now, let's find out and get started in when you actually made the move to get into broadcasting as a broadcaster.

FREY: Maybe we should. There's another step in there before that, Martin, that I think probably we should . . . And that's the fact that they the studio moved from the above the Rogers Jewelry location 16 North Sixth Street down to Sixth and Ohio 24½ South Sixth Street which, at one point, (let's see --the northeast corner, that would be) was the Beach block. Part of the Root Store was in that building where now, I guess, the Root parking lot is. Well, this is kind of an interesting thing. They had to move the station when they were off the air, of course. They had the Beach block location -- which again was on the second floor -- already to go but the equipment had to be moved so several of us who were more or less working at the station moved all the equipment of the station at night after midnight after they signed off. They signed off at midnight. This one night, we carried bodily all the equipment -- control board and everything that the station operated with -- carried it down the street and up the stairs and into the Beach block. The engineers hooked it all up and they went on the air the next morning. 1933 or '34

MP: And you participated in that even though you were actually not a member of the broadcasting staff?

FREY: That's right. All the people who worked in any capacity were there and helped, which was part of the job.

MP: So, from there then . . .

FREY: After that, Martin, I left. 1936 I was with bands by that time and left and went on the road and didn't get back in to Terre Haute until 1942, actually. I came back for real brief periods but not to work or anything.

MP: I think it's a safe assumption to say that if we trace early commercial broadcasting in Terre Haute to studio locations in the city, that the first studio was in the Deming Hotel. We're sure of that. For how long we don't know. From there it apparently went to the Oddfellows Building which is at Eighth and Ohio . . .

FREY: South Eighth Street.

MP: Right. And from there /it moved/ to the Rogers Building; and from there to the Beach block at the Root store; and from there to Sixth and Poplar, apparently . . .

FREY: Where it stayed for a long, long time -- until 1955.

MP: Right. All right. So now . . . we have gone from Rogers to the Beach block. You were then not on the staff yet /when the studio was located/ in the Beach block, were you?

FREY: No. Same thing. It was the same setup as I had before the Rogers location.

MP: How much time -- back in those years when you were singing and doing these musical programs -- did you spend at the station?

FREY: Probably more than I should have. I was fascinated with the business -- any phase of the business. Probably, if I had known it, I was fascinated just with radio and didn't realize it; but I was, of course, involved in the singing end. I was down there probably part of every day. I didn't have a program every day. /I had one only/ a couple of times a week. But I was there anyway, because I was just fascinated by it.

MP: So in addition then to your own musical program and other musical programs, did . . . can you recall any other particular events? Most of the programming then was live. Were there any speakers that came in of a national importance or anything like that?

FREY: Martin, I know there probably were . . . I don't think /there was/ anybody of national importance, but I'm sure there were some talk programs. Again I was probably kind of on a one-track situation there and was more interested in /the/ musical end than in the others, but I'm sure there were other types of programs, talk programs and . . . But a lot of it was musical.

MP: Before we start developing your actual broadcasting career, while we're on the subject of music, you remember then Burl Ives?

FREY: I sure do.

MP: Did you actually work with him?

FREY: Yes.

MP: What kind of a relationship was that?

FREY: Well, as I say, there were three of us who had regular singing programs; and we were there together quite a bit and listened to each other and talked a lot. He was in school at ISU at the time. He had been in school at Eastern Illinois, as I remember, and came over here for some special work and was studying under a local folk music teacher, woman. I don't recall the name or anything, but he was taking -- studying -- folk music at the time. All through this he was studying folk music.

MP: Um-mmm.

FREY: And spending his time at the radio station.

MP: Did you say that Bill Bearman was the manager then?

FREY: Bill Bearman was the manager. Right.

MP: All right. Now. Should we now begin pursuing your actual broadcasting career or are there some other thoughts that you have prior to . . .

FREY: I don't think so. As I mentioned, I was in the music business and traveled with traveling orchestras for quite some time. I came back in occasionally and played with a local band but then went right back out again. But I came back in 1942 to, I thought, probably stay in Terre Haute. I didn't know exactly what I was going to do at that time. We were on a very successful . . . band that I was with at the time. But the war was on. I was 1-A. It was becoming difficult to find places to live and the places . . . Housing was getting tough all over the country, and my wife was going to have out

FREY: first son. I thought, well, I don't know. I don't think I want to drag a child around like the life we've been leading, so I just made up my mind that when he was born I was going to quit. So he was born in 1942. Before time for the baby to be born, I came home, left our last job (with the band) and came home and was here with no job. So I tried a number of things. I worked at several things. There were a couple of plants here in town that I worked at. There were various things like that.

And then I was again playing with Leo Baxter's band which was by that time in Terre Haute. And Leo was musical director at WBOW. So one night on a job -- I wasn't working daytime -- I said something about "gee, I wish I could find something to do in the daytime." Things were pretty tough to find a job. He said, "Well, why don't you come up to the station and audition to be an announcer?" I said, "Well, I've never done anything like that before, and I don't know whether I could or not." He said, "Well, you might as well try." So I did. I went up and auditioned, and I was very bad, I know. I listened to myself and thought it was terrible. George Jackson was the manager then. Well, George had a talk with me and said, "Well, you're not very good but," he said, "we need people." He said, "why don't you go home and read aloud for two or three weeks and come back up and we'll try it again?" So I did just that and when I went back up, he hired me. That was the spring of 1942.

MP: That was right in the middle of the war. So your broadcasting career began then. You were hired by George Jackson, and Leo Baxter was the musical director. He later became program director.

FREY: Leo later became program director. Right.

MP: So now you're in the radio station there. What was your first job?

FREY: Well, my first job, Martin, was DJ /disc jockey/. In fact, I started out on the morning shift working -- oh, I forgot what time we signed on. About 6:00 as I remember. And then I spun the records at that time in the morning. And /what/ we did /was/ kind of interesting too. I had a chance from the very beginning to do some news because we did the news at the control board. We ran the musical programs -- the disc jockey part -- spun the records, and whenever there was a newscast scheduled, we did the newscast also right there at the controls. There were no newsmen as such. We were all news men!

MP: But there wasn't the importance attached to news then as there was in later years?

FREY: No, except that 99% of our news was national news -- national and state -- and off the United /Press/ wire, strictly off the wire. And, of course, all the war news was part of it. We had /a/ network, of course, by that time. They were a NBC affiliate. But the network news programs were limited to early morning and maybe a short one at noon or something like that. That was all of it, so we had to fill in.

MP: Now, you said you were a disc jockey. They didn't call them disc jockeys in those days, did they? Not really. Weren't you really hired as an announcer? Didn't they say that you are an announcer?

FREY: Yes. That's right. The disc jockey title or tag came along later. We were hired as announcers. But announcers did all those things. They played the records and talked and read the news and read the commercials. You did the whole thing. In those days, you sat at a control board with a turntable on each side of you and the controls in front of you; and you played the records, talked about the records, read the commercials, did the news when the news came up, etc. Everything that came up, that one person did it.

MP: How many hours did you work in those war years? Your first job. Remember? Were they long hours? Short hours?

FREY: Not too long. As I recall when I had the morning shift, I used to get off, I think, around 2:00 or 3:00 (p.m.) in the afternoon. But I started about 5:00 [a.m.] so it was a long-enough day.

MP: So you were just an announcer then. In some stations back in those days, I understand that you not only announced but you had to do other duties as well. Maybe sell or . . . .

FREY: No. We didn't work like that. We did everything that was required of the announcer capacity but not anything else. If you were in sales, you were in sales, etc. But we had no, as I say, newsmen as such. Kind of interesting thing too . . . in the Sixth Street location --[the] Sixth and Poplar location -- our teletype machines (ours [were] newscopy machines) were downstairs in a back room and our control room was upstairs, so we would have a newscast coming up -- maybe a 15-minute newscast coming up -- and we would be playing records. We'd put on a record and race down the stairway and pull off all the wire copy we could pull from the machine, drag it back up stairs -- often dragging it behind us up the stairs -- usually get there just in time to change to another record. Then [we would] edit it -- read it and edit it -- while we were playing records and put together a 15-minute newscast to go on the air with commercials. So you needed four hands and four feet, really, to do the job right. But we managed to get by.

MP: The records that you played on the air were the old 78s, which you can't get now, and the 33-1/3s, right?

FREY: Mostly 33-1/3. Yes. We had a transcribed library that had several -- I know you've seen the old transcriptions. [They] had several selections on each side of the record. Most of the things we played were those kind.

MP: You were talking about quickly editing the news there. I am sure that you remember, as I did when I first started, the old transcription libraries in which you were provided with a script to a musical program and

MP: which you had two records -- one on each turntable -- and you quickly had voice tracks. Do you remember that?

FREY: Yes. I sure do. And I also remember that there would be programs -- sponsored programs -- like that. You would have to read commercials over and cut out commercials that were on the transcription. Or if it was a network program, often you had local commercials that would be read over the network commercials. In other words, the network commercial would not go out. Your commercial would go out. Those had to be timed exactly to fit the time span that it was allotted.

MP: Harry, who were some of the people, who were some of the staff of WBOW in 1942 that worked with you?

FREY: Well, let's see. Right before I had started there -- he wasn't there then -- but Ralph Tucker was the man on the street in that period right there. He had a program down in front of Hillman Jewelers in which he talked to people daily about various things. He also did sports on the station. This was all just ahead of when I came in. Luke Walton was in that period too. Luke was a salesman -- now there is where some of the dual jobs you were talking about now -- Luke did sell, and he also made his own commercials. Now, he didn't do any announcer work as such, but he did make his own commercials.

MP: He later became a sports announcer and a very good one . . .

FREY: Right. Right. I don't recall many of the staff except George Jackson who did some news (George was the manager at that time) and some announcing. He had a very fine voice and a lot of experience. A very good man. And Ferrall Rippetoe was there a little after that and did most of the . . . We finally got into the position where we were doing the commercial news separate from the control board. So this made it a little better and Ferrall did all the Terre Haute Brewing Company Champaign Velvet news. It was all sponsored by Champaign Velvet. Later, I went into that slot and did the Champaign Velvet news, but at that time, he did it all.

MP: Leo Baxter was the . . .

FREY: Leo Baxter was the program director. Let's see . . . The traffic manager was Mary Kigin.

MP: Do you remember some of the other announcers?

FREY: Neil Van Ells was in that group. Neil was quite a fine performer. Neil also was in the first beginnings of our news department, as such -- when we started having people in the news to just do news.

MP: We'll talk a little more about news a little bit later. Let me ask you what kind of . . . in addition to news, war news particularly, what kind of programming was there on the station in the '40s?

FREY: Well, again, Martin, a lot of it was locally originated. A lot more so than later. There were a lot of programs that were produced by the people at the station. There were various types of programs including public interest programs, transcribed. We had our own recording equipment, which then was disc. It was all run by a chief engineer who was a very good one and knew how to operate the things. We cut our own discs when we made a special program.

Of course, as we mentioned, we had a network tie. It was NBC, and there were some network programs and some of the early variety shows in the morning that were on then. It was the two different networks -- the red and blue I guess it was instead of NBC.

MP: Can you particularly recall any of the outstanding or any of the local programming during that time that you thought was outstanding or comes to your mind at the moment -- aside from what normally would be public service programming? Any musical programs or talk programs or . . . .

FREY: Oh, some musical programs. We had, for a number of years at the Sixth Street location of WBOW, a noontime musical show which Leo Baxter and I both played in. We had a little four-piece orchestra that played every noon and it was a . . . .

FREY: Well, there were commercials interspersed in it. But it was a live musical program, and we had several of that type.

MP: I remember in later years when I became affiliated with the station, that same program you're talking about then did not have the live musicians--only Leo who played the organ with one hand and the piano . . . . It was "The Music Makers."

FREY: The Music Makers. Right.

MP: They were on at noon and /were a very popular program, I must say. What kind of problems surfaced? Any kind of problems surfaced in those areas; I mean in those days? Equipment problems or technical?

FREY: Not really. I can't remember any really outstanding technical problems we had. I'm sure there were some, but it seemed to me that maintenance of the equipment and everything was excellent. /I really can't recall any great amount of problems. A lot of the equipment, I do remember, was made by our people. We would need some electronic piece to do something with and the engineering staff would just build it right there because sometimes you couldn't get what you needed. That was also the days of wire recorders rather than tape recorders.

MP: What do you remember about the wire recorders?

FREY: Well, I remember that when the wire once got tangled, you might as well throw it away and forget it. I don't know if the quality was . . . of course /it was not as good as the tape recorders, but it wasn't bad for a little tiny piece of wire.

MP: In 1942 in those war years, what kind of impact did the local radio station make on the community?

FREY: Well, I think the radio stations were looked upon as the source of information about the war. War news was very important. Not only the national news of it but the news that we followed up with was terribly important to people. There /were not as many national

FREY: news periods as we are used to now, so people pretty much depended . . . if they missed . . . . The main national news period was the morning news with Morgan Beatty. "World News Roundup" was the real big one. And in between, they depended on us to bring the war news to them. So it was pretty important.

MP: The city of Terre Haute, then, and the surrounding community then listened to the radio station?

FREY: Right. And it was the only radio station in the area, of course, and, of course, /there was/ no television. The focus was on radio.

MP: When you were in radio during that period in the '40s, I take it you were sufficiently well enough known that in your private life people knew who you were and what you did?

FREY: Yes. You got a certain amount of that, of course, not as much as you do now. But people knew. Listening to radio was, of course, like watching television now. That's what there was, and people were with it a lot more. There were some people, too, that I recall, who went on to do a lot bigger things. Darl Wible, for instance, was in that area.

Our sports person at WPOW did all our play-by-play and this kind of thing which was very important then. Of course, Darl was a doctor of communications now at Ball State University.

John Roedel. I just heard from John the other day. John was one of our announcers who left the station not too long after I started, which was maybe '43. /He/ has been at KSD in St. Louis ever since, and he has done a very fine job. He was an anchor-man in the news team on TV for a long time, and now he does special work -- still with them.

Art Brown, who was a singer at WBOW, moved into news much, much later and was out on the West Coast as a newsman. Now /he/ is at Dayton at one of the Dayton stations in television news.

So there were a lot of people through here.

FREY

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MP:

Harry, in your broadcast career, you later probably became more well-known for news, particularly in the later years of your career. But back when you first started during the 40's, that is when news really took a hold in radio, didn't it -- not only on the national level but beginning on the local scene?

FREY:

Yes, I think that was the real start of broadcast news importance, and I think it stemmed a lot from people like Ed Murrow and various network personalities who . . . I don't think anybody will ever forget Ed Murrow's work during the war. I think that set the stage for the importance of news, because people became aware that this was a daily, almost a minute by minute contact with what was going on at these far theaters and it became very important to them.

MP:

And that was the time when people . . . when probably the national news took precedence over local news, didn't it?

FREY:

Absolutely! Absolutely! All we did, really, was supplement what they were getting from the national people. All in all, I think overall locally and nationally it just whetted people's appetite for knowing what was going on right then as it was happening.

MP:

Was it during the '40's then that the station began thinking in terms of a local news staff to cover some local news?

FREY:

Yes.

MP:

How did that begin?

FREY:

It was very small beginnings. As I say, we were just doing news. Ferrall Rippetoe was doing the news, most of the major newscasts. But it was still strictly national and state news. We had no local. But then, I don't know really whether it was ( I think it was) Ferrall's idea to begin with that we should have a little more than that. It was . . .

FREY

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FREY: a few stories happening around town. We decided that maybe we should be talking about local news. So we hired a couple of people. One was Howard Stevens who is a writer for the Tribune. He had been a newspaper writer at the time, and we talked him away from the newspaper for a little while. He stayed with us a couple of years and then went back. He was one of our first ones. Sid Silverman, you may recall, was hired to do writing, and there were a couple of others. But we really only had one or two to start with.

It started gradually. It started working with making a few phone calls like -- we make a lot of them now, you know -- calling the police and fire departments, etc. to see what was going on and dropping a story here and there. Maybe we'd only start out with one or two local stories, but they would be sandwiched in with the national, and gradually the local angle became more and more important. People began listening to it and wanting to hear local news so we decided that there was room on radio for local news just like the newspaper had, so we went still farther and farther into it.

MP: I know the ensuing years you were able to develop that trend a little more.

FREY: Right. Cork McHargue was one of the early ones in that news department. Corky, of course, stayed with radio and is with it yet today.

MP: You know, a lot of people think of radio in terms of something that we listen to, but there was a little flamboyance associated with radio back even in the '40's. For instance, isn't it a fact that Ferrall Rippetoe, who you have alluded to who did national news . . . . I can recall when he broadcast the news, I believe, from the window of Root's Department Store. So there was an effort made to get your radio personalities out, wasn't it?

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FREY: Right. We were beginning to see that they were being looked at as personalities by people. This was all gradual. It didn't evolve overnight. Not only did Ferrall do news in the windows downtown, but I finally did too. We did news in the Root Store; we did it in one of the furniture stores on the north side of Wabash [Avenue]. I can't remember now which one it was, but we did the news in several places downtown.

MP: Did you find that you got a good public reception?

FREY: Oh, real good. You have maybe a lot of people standing out in front and listening to you. You had a speaker out on the street, so they could hear it, and we'd do that maybe four . . . . It would be under a contract setup with the advertiser and maybe as long as 13 weeks, we'd be there every day.

MP: Harry, you, of course, have done a lot of news, but you also . . . . For example, didn't you also do sports?

FREY: No. I started out as an announcer, did news, /and/ finally went into program director for FM. /FM is frequency modulation. The frequency modulates or varies, instead of the amplitude or power. /

See WBOW had the first FM outlet in the area. This is way back -- about '48, I guess.

MP: I remember you doing color for football games.

FREY: Yes, I did color for football games with several play-by-play people that we had. Bob Ferguson was one of the sportsmen that we had, and I did color with him.

I was going to say I went from just being an announcer, and doing news like that, into program director for FM when we started having FM on the station. /That/ was programmed separately. We programmed our own line up of programs -- mostly recorded, but it was different, anyway. And we went that way for about a year or so before they

FREY: decided it was a little early to try to sell it by itself. We finally went to broadcasting the same programs.

MP: Before we leave your being an announcer, I want to ask you this: back in those days -- we're talking about 1942, 1943, in the '40s (that's a little less than 40 years ago) -- there was a trend, was there not, among announcers that they not only should sound well but that they do good work on the air? I remember -- I got in much later . . . . Wasn't there the feeling among announcers that you read your copy perfectly? Tell us something about that. I understand that there even used to be contests among people on how long you could go without mispronouncing a word.

FREY: Absolutely. And I have to credit Ferrall Rippetoe with a good part of our interest in that kind of thing. And it was interest. It was not as if he held a club over our head, but it was just a contest that everybody was wanting to do well in. All of us who did news (and there were several besides myself) or commercials or anything -- we would have contests to see how long we could go without making one mistake, and sometimes it went for days and days and days. This was a real, real important thing to everybody in the station.

MP: It was just . . . . you simply didn't mispronounce then?

FREY: No. It was a pride of work and you just tried desperately not to miss anything.

MP: You know, as long as you and I both have been in the business, it's only human nature that you will (we call it) fluff or kick a word now and then but . . . .

FREY: And you did, finally, but you went just as long as you possibly could and you get . . . . Oh, I don't think there were any great rewards. It was just the idea of being the one who went the longest without making mistakes.

MP: So there was a lot of pride in your work?

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FREY: Tremendously. Right.

MP: When you did boot a word or something, I understand you heard about it?

FREY: I'll never forget. I was doing the late news for a time at 10:00 at night and Ferrall Rippetoe was a real taskmaster. He listened to every broadcast. You knew that when you were on the air, Ferrall was listening; and if you made a mistake, you'd get a call from him later. He'd say, "Weren't you feeling very good tonight?" or something like that. "Well, no, I was feeling all right." "Well, I just wondered. Kinda made a little bobble there --just wondered if you weren't feeling good." If you made another one, he'd call and say, "Maybe we oughta put somebody else on the news for a while. Are you tired or something?" "No, not at all." If you made about another one, that was the end of it. You were off of it from then on. It was just one of those things. He was just a person who believed in doing your work thoroughly and without mistakes.

MP: He was a real professional, wasn't he?

FREY: Very professional.

MP: I've got my own Ferrall Rippetoe story which I won't get into now (laughter), but this interest, of course, on the local scene in announcers doing their best and working without fluffing their words even prevailed on the national level too. In other words, when a fluff was made, somebody out in the audience heard it, and somehow got to your attention too, didn't they?

FREY: That's right. There was attention paid to it. I don't know, it just seems like there was more attention paid to exactness then than there is now but then that's . . . .

MP: During the year of . . . . During the '40s when World War II was going so strong, we knew the news reflected the World War II interest. Did the rest of the programming also have that war flavor?

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MP: Bond /U.S. war/ drives and all of that? Did you do any bond drives at WBOW?

FREY: Oh, yes. I can't recall the details of it, but I know the program was filled with this kind of thing. The networks, of course, were all doing a lot of war effort work, and we did at the local level also. Pretty much all through the years of the war the station's emphasis was on this kind of thing.

MP: You, of course, are best known now as a newsman but (and you did a lot of things before news and we've mentioned some of them) you were an announcer. Later, you actually became the program director of the station. What was that like?

FREY: Well, I went from program director of FM. Then Leo Baxter went to more musical duties, and this kind of thing, so I went into the job of program director of the station. I then went into sales after that and wound up as sales manager, and finally I was assistant manager under Mr. Rippetoe.

MP: We've talked about some of the things that you did. Do you remember any interesting events that occurred of the unusual variety associated with the station? Anything along those lines that particularly stick out in your mind?

FREY: Well, I remember, of course, one connected with news when we fed the explosion story Munition Train Explosion, Louis, Indiana, March 29, 1953 to World News Roundup with Morgan Beatty. It's not so unusual now to feed network programs to radio or TV, but at that time it was. It was extremely unusual, and that was quite an experience.

MP: It was quite a thrill then to know that your voice was heard round, well, around the country, I guess.

FREY: Yes. I'll never forget that. I got letters from people. I got letters from Henry Cook in Chicago who was an alumnus of WBOW. He was with WBBM at the time in Chicago, and he wrote me. I had two or three

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FREY: others /letters/ and telephone calls from around the country from people that I had run into before. So it was pretty much of a thrill.

MP: So you stayed in radio broadcasting after and throughout the war years; and you left WBOW and you later got back into radio with a station called WMFT. (641 Ohio Street)

FREY: I left WBOW in 1955. I decided I wanted to try something else, like everybody does. You want to get out of the business you're in. I stayed four years in the furniture business and didn't like it and came back to radio at WTHI (again in FM) when they put FM on the air at WTHI. So I worked here on FM, and in sales in AM later. Then I left and went to WMFT. I did news there -- mostly news and sales.

MP: And then, of course, you later got into television and that's an entirely different thing.

FREY: In 1962, I came back here to television.

MP: In this oral history interview we've tried to concern ourselves with your radio broadcast memories and things. Now, looking back some 40 years and all -- what are your observations now of your career here? It's been all a Terre Haute career, hasn't it?

FREY: Yes. As far as broadcast is concerned. Yes. Well, I wouldn't trade those early years for anything. I think, as we've mentioned already, there was a feeling of trying to do your best all the time. I think this applies to many fields too. I think maybe we've lost some things over the years. There was a lot more desire to be just as good as you could be. You knew you were not perfect, of course. But the desire there was to do the absolute best you could because the public was listening to it, and you were an announcer at an established station, and you should sound like you . . . the best you possibly could.

MP: You were expected to set some sort of standard of excellence, were you not?

FREY: Yes. And you felt like you had an obligation to do this, and I think that was good. I think that promoted a lot of good work. In fact I know it did. By many people all over the country. I think we've lost some of that incentive.

MP: Harry, did that intense radio training in those early years -- that dedication and excellence in work, I take it -- help you later in your television years?

FREY: No question about it. I don't think I . . . . I think it was one of the major factors that helped me.

MP: What are your observations now? Can you make any kind of comparisons to radio today? What it was?

FREY: Well, it's so different now. Radio then was based on the person. Now, it seems to be based on more what the person is doing. I mean as far as the style of music. The actual person himself is not of the importance now that it was then. So it is pretty hard to compare them, you know.

MP: Times are different.

FREY: Times are different and you'd be foolish to say one is better than the other. This is the way it is now. Present times are what people want to hear -- obviously.

MP: Harry, is there anything that . . . . There is something that we left out, and we should have covered this a long time ago. Back in the early years -- and this may be a little out of place within the context of this oral history interview, but it's been so interesting we perhaps have jumped around more than we should have, but I wanted . . . back in those early years (and I don't know whether you were affiliated with WBOW or not) . . . .It was the only commercial station in town at the time. There were some outstanding programs that we didn't mention. One of them was Si and Ezra which it is my understanding were the local Amos and Andy and just about as popular.

FREY: They were. They were extremely popular and, really, I remember hearing them, and they were extremely good. They were as good as any of the later

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FREY: nationally-known programs of this type. They had a regular program on the station. As I recall, I think they were on once or twice a week, but it was a regular slot, an evening so-called prime-time slot, and it had a tremendous following. People just listened to them all the time and talked and laughed about their dialog. It was very, very good.

MP: Who were Si and Ezra?

FREY: Well, Si and Ezra were Guy Slover and Gene Morgan. That duo came out of the old Harmony Four Quartet, which was a barbershop type quartet that sang around Terre Haute at all kinds of functions. Very, very good. It was made up of Slover and Gene Morgan (Si and Ezra) and Carl Jones, who many people will remember around here, and Pawnee Morgan, Gene's brother, who made up the quartet.

MP: They were a big act and had a big following?

FREY: They had a big following. In fact, as I remember, they made some appearances away from Terre Haute, too. They were pretty well known around this part of the country. And Si and Ezra, I am convinced, could have gone almost anywhere, but they were local people who had local jobs (I don't recall now exactly what they all did but they all had jobs here in Terre Haute), so they didn't want to leave. They did it all right here. But they were extremely good.

MP: Harry, one of the things I find a little -- oh, I don't want to say -- distressing is maybe a little too hard a word, but there really is nothing, there is no record as such, of any of these people that you've talked about today. I recognize that there was no tape recording then but do you know of anything . . .

FREY: I don't, and it's really too bad because it would be fine to have a record of Si and Ezra and the Harmony Four and the voices of all these people. I think it would be real good to have, but as far as I know there is no record.

MP: Is there anything now that, as we look back--and we're just about to conclude this interview -- is

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MP: there anything that we should talk about that we haven't? Can you recall? /Is there/ anything that comes to mind? Have we pretty well covered it?

FREY: I think, Martin, that we've pretty well covered it. It's a little difficult, of course, to remember all the people. I wish I could remember every one who was involved because there were a lot of people involved over the years in broadcasting. But it's pretty difficult to remember all of them. Some of them stand out, of course, more than others.

MP: I think we've covered some of the events that you talked about and all; and I think that for the most part, Harry, this interview has been biographical in nature because I think it lends itself toward that. You were an announcer and you worked in radio and these are your recollections of the business. /You/ go back to the '30s and then to the '40s and the like, and I think that you've been a significant part of the history of radio in this town.

FREY: It's been a fascinating part of my life, I know. And, of course, once I got into broadcasting, I thought I wanted out once, but I was totally wrong and it's been . . .

MP: Did you enjoy it every bit as much as you did your early musical career?

FREY: Yes. Probably even more. Although I enjoyed it. But they're allied to a certain extent.

MP: Listen. Thank you very much, Harry.

FREY: Thank you, Martin.

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